Canton—China's Greatest City

THIS is a charming narrative of the oldest of old Chinese cities, its densest crowd in its narrowest streets, its tongueless bell, its centuries-old water clock, its City of the Dead, its shops—a lively account of Canton of today.

By HAMILTON BUTLER

THE city of Canton, which welcomed the first ships that came out of the West to trade with China, still holds its rank as the most interesting spot to which the visitor to the Far East is admitted. It is not only the richest in historical memories of the early days when the traders from our own and other shores clung with superhuman tenacity and endurance to the small breach which they made there in the almost impregnable wall of Chinese exclusiveness, but it presents to the interested spectator as well the picture of an immense societal unit, unlike any other in the world, working out its Oriental destiny scarcely singed by its contact with the fires of the West. It is, with its suburbs, the largest city in China and easily the most interesting of those in which foreigners are admitted to residence and trade. It has not the gilt-roofed palaces and temples of Peking nor the squalor of the native city of Shanghai, but it has more than either of these cities to offer to the visitor who comes to see a great commercial metropolis with all its displays of wealth and beehive activity. Its shops are unsurpassed in the Orient—its looms turn out the silk which first turned the eyes of the Europeans eastward—its jade and ivory are the cynosure of travelers.

A person crossing China in an aeroplane would fail to discern any striking difference in the various cities above which he flew. They are all very much alike when one looks down upon them from any point of vantage—a mass of grey roofs huddled together in seemingly hopeless confusion, broken here and there by the figured roof of a temple or "yamen," and brightened occasionally by the green foliage of massive trees. And even when he descends and walks through the streets his vision is constantly obstructed by the high grey or dun-color walls of brick and stucco which surround the buildings and secure to their occupants a degree of privacy and protection. It is only in the shop-lined thoroughfares that his eye is met by anything to cheer it. The gaudily decorated signs in black and gold and red which dangle above the pavement and set forth the virtues of the various shops and the marvelous displays of stock presented by the shops themselves at last convince him that his visit has been worth-while.

The walled-city of Canton, in this respect, is much like the other large cities of China. It lies on the low alluvial plain created by the conjunction of the North and West rivers, a quarter of a mile back from the banks of the Pearl or "Chu-kiang," and is surrounded on all but the north side by extensive suburbs. Across the Pearl the island of Honam and the suburb of Fati materially add to its immense population, while a water population of half a million moor along the banks of the rivers and creeks which surround it. The rugged walls of the city, beginning on the plain, are forced to climb as they run to the north the temple-crowned peaks split away by nature from the White Cloud Mountains which seven miles from Canton rear their mist-veiled heads above the local cloud-line and afford the wearied urbanite, in their shady groves and restful temples, an opportunity of respite from the crowded life of the city itself. The traveler coming to Canton from Hong Kong, as all travelers do, is charmed by the contrast between these hills and the placid serenity of the low, green fields, with their pagoda-topped knolls, through which he passes, and the dull and uninviting exterior of the city which is his destination. As his boat pokes her nose alongside the wharves where once stood the "factories" of the early traders, the countryside is forgotten, however, for the moment, and his attention is riveted by the mass of humanity below him, hurrying, skurrying hither and thither on the great errand of securing a livelihood. If he is a tourist, in another ten minutes he is rattling along behind a swift-footed Hermes into the heart of a social museum.

The name "Canton," as applied to the city, is unknown to the Chinese. It comes into English through a Portugese corruption of "Kwangtung," the name of the province in which it is situated and of which it is the political capital and the commercial metropolis. The Chinese refer to it simply as "Sheng-ch'eng," the provincial seat, or "Yang-ch'eng," the "City of Rams." With the latter name is connected the story of its founding.

A great many years ago, as the story runs, five genii were seen standing where the city is built. To the great astonishment of those who saw them, they were suddenly turned into rams. The rams, in turn, were changed to stone and are still to be seen by the doubting, resting on an altar in the Temple of the Five Genii in the heart of the city. They were "somewhat damaged," one is told, in a fire which occurred in the temple during the occupation of Canton by the British after the second Anglo-Chinese war. It takes a large amount of imagination and a supposition of very considerable damage, however, to enable one to see in the five shapeless stones, about eighteen inches long, the metamorphosis of rams.

The Temple of the Five Genii does not appear on the list of "sights" to which the ordinary tourist is treated by the native guides. These gentry have arranged their itinerary to net them a maximum of "cumshaw" with a minimum of labor. It well repays a visit, however. There hangs suspended in an open tower before the Hall of Rams the largest bell in South China—and about this bell there hangs a tale. When it was first hung it was predicted that should the bell ever give forth sound, disaster would come upon the city. To prevent the fulfillment of the prediction it was deprived of its tongue, and it remained for a well directed shot from a British ship-of-war in the bombardment of Canton during the "Arrow" war to break the centuries-old silence which it had maintained and sound the knell of the city. Canton surrendered that night. The damaged face of the bell was to the south, whence the shot came, but the Chinese in an effort to "save face" have re-hung it so that it is now to the north!

A little way from this temple stands the so-called "Temple" of Confucius, where the visitor may see what he will see in no other Confucian shrine in South China, a statue of the great sage and teacher. The idea that Confucius is "worshipped" by the Chinese is true only in the sense that he is "revered" by them. The great sage himself would be the first to deny anything more. He collected the annals of his forefathers and commented upon them and gave to the generations which were to come after him an ethical system under which man might live in peace with man. The idea of placing idols in the halls erected to the perpetuation of his memory or even of creating likened images of the sage himself, is repugnant to the Chinese. It was, therefore, with little less than consternation that the Cantonese saw the statue forced upon them by a powerful official, and grumbling impotently against the desecration, declared no good could come of it. The prophecy came true. A sister shot to the one which had rung the tongueless bell of the Genii took the sage in a vulnerable spot and toppled him from his pedestal into the dust of ages below. They have picked him up, however, repaired him, and under a new coat of paint he looks as bright and chipper as ever.

The City of the Dead is known to everyone who has "done" Canton with a guide. It lies outside the city walls, to the north, and consequently is about as far from the point of his arrival as even the unwary tourist will allow himself to be inveigled into going. It is needless to say that the farther one goes with a Cantonese guide the less he will have to bring back with him. The City of the Dead is worth seeing, however. It is the temporary resting place of hundreds of Chinese bodies awaiting burial. It is not always an easy matter to get buried in China, if one's friends and relatives happen to be orthodox. It is necessary for them to call in the seers to determine upon a propitious day for the internment and to select a propitious site for the grave. There are many things to be considered before a decision can be made. Unless a proper day is chosen and a suitable grave site selected, the spirit of the deceased will not rest at ease, and uneasy spirits in China have an unpleasant way of haunting the living. The more human the seer who is hired to determine by geomantical means these all-important points, the more protracted the process—and the less contracted the bill. In the meantime, the poor body about which all this trouble is being taken is rotting in its huge cedar casket, stowed away behind a curtain in one of the hundreds of little apartments in the City of the Dead. Some remain there for days, others for years. A table well supplied with papier-mâché fruit and other delicacies, decorated with flowers, and, in the case of the well-to-do, supporting paper servants, stands ready at hand for service in another world. The greatest solicitude for the well-being of the deceased is apparent on every hand—as long as the rent for the apartment in which his body reposes is regularly met. It sometimes happens, however, that for one reason or another this is not the case, and the coffin is then unceremoniously dumped into the woodshed and if not later claimed, is buried at the expense of the corporation with no great show of respect. At the time of the revolution the

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A Chinese railway station between Canton and Hong Kong. Chinese soldiers act as guards. Mother China is stirring in her age-long sleep and will awaken.

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The housing problem does not bother the Cantonese. To half a million citizens these boats are residences and business places combined.